

Suffering, a Portal to Freedom

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Fiona: Since the publication of *Beat Fatigue with Yoga* by Cherry Red Books in 2006, when I wrote about my recovery from ME (chronic fatigue syndrome), I have continued my journey to health. But I now realise that wellness doesn't mean something purely physical. Rather it means a true integration of peace, stability and happiness at all levels of being. To fully appreciate this though, I had to get very ill again. This is how the understanding came about.

In 2007, after teaching in London for two years, I decided to go to India. I was still hungry to know more about *yoga*, as I felt that I wasn't getting my deeper questions, "Who am I, and what is existence?" answered. I hoped that India might provide some clues. I bought a rucksack, investigated in a few *ashrams* (spiritual centres) on the internet, then set off. It was quite daunting, but once I was there I felt very free and soaked up whatever I could learn. At the Vyasa Ashram near Bangalore I studied the *Bhagavad Gita*, the main scriptural text of India, and learnt about the concept of *karma yoga*, non-attachment to the result of any action. I chanted my way around the south of the country, visiting five different *ashrams* and trying out various traditions of *yoga*. I also had an intensive bout of *panchakarma*, an Ayurvedic detox treatment, to get all the medication that I had taken when I had been ill completely out of my system. I was indulging in a kind of spiritual pick-'n-mix, but still I didn't find my answers. But I got the travel and the spiritual bug, and soon started writing for *Yoga and Health* magazine about my adventures.

I was full of energy and brimming with health. Next I went trekking in Nepal, then set off for Dharmasala in North India to hear teachings from the Dalai Lama and to study Tibetan Buddhism. To make ends meet and support all this seeking, I started setting up *yoga* retreats when I was back in the UK. Somewhat to my surprise, people with CFS and other health conditions started to come because they had read this book and were interested in trying *yoga*. I slowly established a network and began to specialise in teaching *yoga* to people with CFS and other chronic health conditions. I am completely indebted to all the many people I have worked with over the last few years – they taught me such a lot and shared their knowledge generously with me. In fact they have been my best teachers.

One of the things I learnt from these people was that there were many others like me looking for some kind of meaning in life, and also that many people with CFS had mystic experiences of oneness (sometimes called non-dual awakenings). This doesn't apply to everyone, and anyhow, experiences are nothing without understanding of their meaning, but it still seemed to me to be crucially important in cracking the code and work out what life was about – to understand the question, "What am I?" It seemed that, for some reason, suffering brought people closer to this.

I originally trained as a teacher with the Yoga for Health Foundation, but in 2009 I decided to do further training and become a KHYF teacher. This is the *yoga* tradition as taught by the great *yogi* Krishnamacharya, his son T.K.V. Desikachar and now his grandson Kausthub. Based in Chennai, India, I knew that their standards were amongst the best in the world, rigorous and of a very high quality. They maintain that *yoga* should be taught for the individual, and from this developed world-class training in *yoga* therapy. Importantly for me, there was a course in the UK which included a thorough teaching of the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali. I was blessed to have great

teachers, Sarah Ryan, Liz Murtha and my mentor Gill Lloyd, whose teachings I lapped up, especially enjoying the Vedic chanting and the philosophy. What the tradition really gave me, however, was many more ways to work with my students with CFS. I learnt that the most effective tools for healing included *mantra* (sound) and *pranayama* (conscious breathing), and that *yoga* is about freedom – seeing through our *samskaras* (habits) to the peace of our own nature. I then started to develop teacher-training courses for *yoga* teachers aimed at treating fatigue and stress conditions, having realised that there was a growing need and also that there was a lot of misunderstanding around CFS/ME. *Yoga* could certainly help people to get better, but it could also make those with this condition worse if it wasn't taught correctly.

At the end of 2009 I attended a course on the *Yoga Sutras* in Chennai with Desikachar and Kausthub. I still had an idea – some kind of yearning inside – that the path of *yoga*, which had restored my health and energy, could lead me to understand who I was and what reality was about. The *Yoga Sutras*, which essentially teach a very logical and elegant psychology on how to live mindfully and how to be free by seeing reality as it is, answered some of these questions. But like so many of us, I also had an inner voice telling me I was an inadequate being, that other people were better than me and that I needed to have the perfect relationship or job to fix this. I knew through what I had learnt about myself so far and from the study of the *sutras* that this wasn't actually true, but sometimes that voice nagged away at me, pushing me to try harder – pushing me to do more in order to fix myself.

After the course in Chennai, I travelled to a pilgrimage centre called Tiruvannamali, the home of the great saint Ramana Maharishi, where I intended to stay for three nights before heading further south to Kerala to spend Christmas with two friends. We even had the train tickets, but then something mysterious happened – on the second day of my stay the two friends independently had crises (the death of a relative and a stolen credit card), which meant our plans were scuppered. My friend Leah flew back to the UK, and Emma couldn't join me from Bali. I was stuck in Tiru, as it is fondly referred to, and couldn't get out of the town every time I tried to book a ticket or make a plan, something happened to prevent me from leaving. I began to get the feeling I was meant to stay! Then I came across a notice for Vedanta teachings as taught in the Chinmayananda tradition by an American called James Swartz.

Vedanta is a traditional path of *yoga* known as *jnana yoga*, or the *yoga* of self-knowledge. It's based on the classical Indian teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads* and the *Brahma Sutras*. These teachings are simply that, "I am whole and complete and need nothing outside myself to make me happy." Happiness, freedom and peace are who I am, but when I seek them in the world – through material possessions, objects or relationships – then I am bound to fail. I need to understand what is real and what isn't. That which is real is that which doesn't change, which is me. This knowledge, through the understanding of the teachings, leads to something known as self-realisation. There is a bit more to it than this, but essentially Vedanta has a similar message to Patanjali's *yoga* – that we all really long for freedom and happiness and that this is our true nature. Ignorance of this causes us to feel inadequate, so we erroneously look outside of ourselves for happiness and consequently identify with the transient objects and situations around us – including our thoughts and relationships, ultimately causing ourselves to suffer. Vedanta, being a non-dual teaching, goes further and shows, through self-enquiry and understanding, that we are not really the body or mind, but are pure consciousness. Through examination, questioning and contemplation, as directed by a teacher, we can understand this for ourselves and realise that there is no separation – all is one. This is known as *advaita*, or non-duality. What I didn't know was that Tiru, this odd place that I couldn't leave, was where people

came to every winter from all over the world to learn about enlightenment.

In the end, I studied Vedanta for two years, looking at some of the main texts from the tradition and spending much time with my teacher. I also studied a little with another teacher from the Dayananda tradition, and learnt the importance of living in a way that is authentic to your nature. If you have the heart of an artist, for example, and you work chasing money in business, then you may become ill from the stress of going against your nature. I learnt that the best way to live is to lead a simple and quiet life, to not be attached to the outcome of any action and not to have expectations. Without quietness and contemplation the self is unlikely to be realised. If the mind is agitated, it will continue to be driven by fear, insecurity, attachment and desire, and will find it difficult to stay present and mindful. Most importantly, I learnt to challenge my thinking – to see that my thoughts could be functional but held little validity beyond that. Our thoughts and emotions are always changing, so how real can they be?

I downsized my life and cut out TV and newspapers. The effects of these teachings meant I no longer struggled or railed against things that happened. I became less likely to resist what life delivered to me in each moment, and understood the logic of accepting whatever happened. Vedanta gave me the confidence to understand that I was indeed whole and complete and that I didn't need material possessions or relationships to add anything to me or to make me happy. It's not that I didn't engage with these things – they were appreciated when I did, but I understood them for what they are. They were not providing me with lasting happiness, and therefore I didn't need to be attached to anything too much. I saw that I was the happiness, part of a divine whole and not separate from anything. Sometimes my mind still told me otherwise, however, and took me away from this. Toward the middle of 2011, I became very busy working and studying. Contemplation was put to one side, and that small voice of ignorance which would point out that I wasn't okay gnawed away at me.

Now I come to the real lesson Life had to teach me – something that couldn't be taught from a book. I was to be given a very difficult test. My worst fear had to be faced. At the beginning of 2011, when I was in India again, I was briefly hospitalised with an episode of dysentery, but seemed to be fine afterwards and continued to teach when I came back to the UK, running more courses. But in August of that year I was struck down with a mysterious fatigue-type illness. In many ways this mimicked the symptoms of ME that I had suffered from years before. My first reaction was one of terror – it was so frightening to experience something that I thought would never happen again, the complete and utter loss of all my energy. It felt as if my wiring had been pulled out. Initially I was too weak to leave the house and couldn't cook or shop for myself. Additionally I had severe muscle pains around my eyes which seemed to torture me day and night. This went on for weeks and I had to cancel more and more work. I had just started teaching philosophy on the Yoga Therapy Diploma course for Yoga Campus, and was very sad when I realised that I would have to let that go. I gave up my *yoga* therapy work too, for the time being. I wasn't sure how I would survive financially and went to stay first with my friend Geri, then with my mother. But this time things were very different from when I was ill before. I now had many more tools to work with and this was the opportunity to put into practice what I had learnt over the past seven years, and what I had been teaching to my *yoga* students. In other words, I had to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. I needed to actually live the teachings from my heart and not just as something theoretical.

As a consequence of studying Vedanta and *yoga*, I had been doing lots of self-enquiry, really looking into the fundamental nature behind the habits and identities that seemed to make up my

personality. I could see that I had repeated a pattern, and had got caught up again in taking on too much work and making myself too busy, which, ironically, was in opposition to the quiet and mindful *yogic* life I was teaching. I began to search myself: Why did I do this? Who was I really – prior to the thinking and behaviour? It wasn't enough just to see the pattern, I needed to find what had caused it or it would catch me out again, as our habits are hardwired. I could see that my body, through its weakness and pain, was asking me to pay attention, to become more present and still. Indeed, I was too ill to do anything but be quiet and meditate.

My Vedanta teacher, who was now in America, emailed me a reminder that I keep with me to this day, "Take all action," he said, "only with peace as the goal. You do not have to achieve anything. You do not have to please anyone. You do not have to be liked. You do not need to help anyone. You do not have to be successful and you do not need to be secure." I printed this out in large, bold capitals. James was making the point that I needed to attend to myself before I could help others, and even then any action should only ever be from the heart – not from a need to please or for attention or to cover up insecurity. He was reminding me that I was actually fine, the real me was not touched by any of this. Later, James and I parted company for personal reasons, but I will always be grateful for what he taught me during the time I was with him. He knew that, like many of us with a history of CFS, I had the pattern of being a people-pleaser because I was still driven by the feeling of being separate and alone. This was largely unconscious, but had led me to take on too much work to prove to myself and the world that I was okay. I was coming from a place of fear and was chasing security outside of myself, and was very busy helping others whilst ignoring my own needs. I thought I had conquered these pattern years before, but evidently I hadn't, which just made it more insidious because it caught me off-guard. The ego (by which I mean the various identifications we take which drive our behaviour) is subtle – we think we have it under control, but it slips back in with destructive behaviour when we least expect it. Unless we are prepared to really look deep inside and examine our unconscious thoughts and feelings and stay present with the dark stuff, like depression, pain, insecurity and agitation, it will continue to trip us up. Now was the time to crack this. Nothing could be hidden anymore.

It was difficult, it took courage and vigilance. I realised how attached I was to being physically healthy, to travelling, socialising and working. This had all slipped from my grasp again – I was too ill to do much. There was a great deal of fear, but I also knew I had to accept and embrace what was happening and not wish for anything to be different – indeed how can we wish for anything to be other than it is? Resistance to what is, and the thought that life shouldn't be exactly as it unfolds in each moment, is the basis of suffering. It really is that simple. I had to forgive myself too, for getting ill – for allowing this pattern to manifest itself again. I was greatly helped by my friend Alex Howard (of the Optimum Health Clinic) who coached me on the phone whenever I lost heart or had moments of despair. Sometimes I felt that I was unravelling, but Alex, who is a psychological therapist, has a great gift for pointing out the positive and reminded me that, although this was a steep learning curve, one day I would see it as a blessing and use it in my own teaching. He showed me that it really was different this time and that it was unhelpful to even think about when I had ME all those years ago. The memory is a trickster and can tell us something is going on when it actually isn't. Memory doesn't reference the truth from the stillness of now, it is just part of the mind which is always thinking about the past or the future. It is not real. Alex worked with love and from his heart.

Others supported me during this crisis, including my *yoga* mentor Gill Lloyd and my dear friends Leah Barnett, Ruth Heatherly, Geri Hollingworth, Jayne Roscoe, Martina Dodder, Liz Edwards, Katrina Heather and my mother. Gill gave me *mantras* around peace (*santih*) to work with. Julia

Matschung, another friend, led by example, as she embodies and lives the teachings. She thoughtfully answered all my questions on the nature of suffering and self-realisation via email from Germany. These friends formed a circle of love around me and supported me as I struggled through. Karen Edwards, who is a self-realised teacher and who has health challenges herself, was a great inspiration to me. Through direct experience, she helped to show me the importance of listening to the truth of my heart – the authentic place of complete stillness that is always there, behind the noise of the mind.

During this time I had moments of great insight – and moments of great despair. I continued to be quiet and still and to observe what came up. I didn't use the label ME or chronic fatigue syndrome, as to me those terms held negative connotations with what had been in the recent past and what was falsely anticipated in the future, which took away more vitality. The very words held a vibration that I didn't wish to engage in. It wasn't about denial, I just lived from moment to moment because that was all that really existed – anything else was only a false concept held in the mind. Sometimes there was energy, at others there was pain and profound fatigue. I learnt to accept, to not resist the symptoms and, more importantly, to not push away the fear of the symptoms when they came, but rather to welcome and nourish everything with compassion. I learnt to embrace my darker emotions and not to run away from them. I was brutally honest with myself and it was painful. Most of us push aside our bad feelings or try to medicate them with alcohol, TV, work, activity or other distractions. When we do this, energy is blocked, as the emotion can't flow. Everything is energy – or *prana*. *Prana* needs to be able to move freely at all levels for true well-being, but it becomes trapped when we deny or turn away from our feelings – when we are not living authentically. Unconscious behaviour is often the result, which then causes us and others around us more suffering, fear and illness. The point was to bring all that was unseen to the light – something that I am still working on. I knew that I couldn't avoid anything now – the only way out of this was through it. Fear is always about the future, so this gave me an amazing opportunity to be present. When anxiety did creep in, I would see that it was just a thought and would come back to now – to presence. It wasn't easy, especially when there was pain, but I just did what I could in each moment and tried to accept everything that arose or, if I couldn't, then to accept that I couldn't accept and that I was struggling! Sometimes the symptoms were very alarming. At times the fatigue was all-encompassing in a way which was in itself painful. My exhausted mind would drift into panic about the future and how I would survive. I watched the resistance. *Yoga* helped me to trust. There is a Sanskrit word we use from the *Yoga Sutras*: *sraddha*. It means “faith and trust.” Two books also helped me greatly, *Falling into Grace* by Adyashanti (Sounds True Publications) and *The Presence Process* by Michael Brown (Namaste Publishing). I thoroughly recommend them.

Meanwhile, I finally received a diagnosis of a parasite which had multiplied all over my system since the dysentery episode in India, so in May 2012, with the help of Charlotte Watts, a nutritionist and friend, I started on an anti-parasite herb. This initially exacerbated my symptoms, and for a while I wasn't sure I was doing the right thing or taking the right medicine. For the time being, I had to continue to cancel much of my teaching, which reminded me of the *karma yoga* lesson – I, the individual, was not in control here. Something greater than me was, so I needed to let go and be grateful as each moment arose. I even questioned my identity as a *yoga* teacher and realised that it was possible I might end up “doing” something else and that it was also possible to be too attached to *yoga*, Vedanta, meditation or even to the idea of being a “spiritual” person. My identities were falling away to nothing. Whilst I was recovering, I watched *Conscious TV* on the internet (Conscious.tv) and found many of the interviews very helpful, particularly one with the Advaita teacher Adyashanti, which I would urge anyone with CFS to watch. I also found

the Byron Katie interview inspiring. Both told stories of suffering and sickness which had led them to freedom.

By August 2012 I had recovered. Again, like the first time I had been ill, I was very grateful for the lesson of being unwell – I could see that it was Grace and that it needed to happen for me to be forced to become still enough. This meant that I could finally understand, through contemplation, what I really needed to, the unhelpful patterns that I needed to see through. My life is different now because of this experience; this lost year, which wasn't about loss at all – although in other ways it was about complete loss. My mind is much quieter, I enjoy spending more time alone in contemplation, I am open to what manifests in each moment and I have developed an inner stillness which feels very solid. I know everything comes and goes immediately, so there is no point holding on or being too attached to either the past or plans for the future. My insecurity, which I have faced up to and which I can see comes from the basic fear that we all have of feeling separate and alone, is dropping away and therefore any ambition I had has disappeared, which is the most tremendous relief. I have no need to achieve anything and nothing to prove to anyone any more, least of all myself. I no longer strive for anything or need attention. I know I am okay whatever happens. "Let go" is my *mantra*. To paraphrase Adyashanti: life will give you what you need, and if you don't learn the lesson the first time, it will keep being repeated until you do.

I can now see that ill health comes from the many unconscious habits that we have and which we keep repeating. Illness is a way of making us pay attention. Until we really get to the bottom of what these patterns are, sickness may reoccur to remind us to stop, listen and learn. Making a drama out of illness and rushing around looking for a cure is not the answer – this is trying to find solutions in the mind rather than the heart. Real health comes from true peace. In fact, the idea of health is just a thought – a concept. So the most important lesson from all this for me was to learn to trust my own heart. I had another pattern to see through in order to appreciate this, that of putting teachers on pedestals in a way which disempowered me. But teachers – and scripture or indeed any teachings – can only take us so far. Ultimately we need to listen to our inner voice and to turn to that inner nothingness, which is actually everything. Some traditions call this the Heart. No one else can do this for us.

I now see that wellness is a place of happiness, peace and acceptance right now, whatever the physical state of being. It is about the internal journey, or the identification of the one who is ever-present and unchanging, rather than the identity with states of health, which come and go. I am a sick person, for example, brings in a whole story about illness yesterday and tomorrow and adds a huge burden to the mind. It is easier to change the internal environment (how we see things) rather than trying to manipulate the world around us, which includes our state of physical well-being. Someone or something may cause us pain, but we are responsible for what we then do with that thought and how we hold onto that. In other words, we are responsible for our own emotional reactions to everything, however bad. This is completely empowering, as it follows that we are actually in charge of our own suffering – it is a choice. So many times I have seen people with ME clutch on to the identity of being ill and of being a victim. Many are incredibly angry – with doctors, with society or even with their own families. The anger comes from fear – they are usually very frightened of the symptoms and will do anything to push them away rather than staying present with them. Additionally, people with ME are often very driven, and as soon as they have any energy they will start again on the ceaseless round of "doing" and achieving, which just makes them ill again. The cure is to really face up to unconscious behaviour from the root and to neutralise it by seeing what is really going on. Illness may bring about major life changes, including loss of income, status, relationship, home and social life. The tendency is to

grasp at all of these with panic, but this will only bring about more suffering. If we can learn to fully let go, relax and trust what life is trying to show us, then we can use suffering as an opportunity to become still and peaceful, to practise deep self-enquiry and understand who we really are.

Many of the ideas from Vedanta and the philosophy from the *Yoga Sutras*, together with what I have studied as a KHYF teacher and, most importantly, what I have learnt from working with over 800 people with CFS over the last five years, are explored in my retreats. People usually come to *yoga* expecting a series of postures that will make them healthy, but it is actually a beautiful philosophy of balance, healing and well-being through empowerment about understanding how to be happy with who you really are in whatever situation you find yourself in. So although *yoga* will certainly give you energy and vitality if you do some of the postures, it has so much more to offer. Ultimately it is about how to be peaceful, free and complete.

When I wrote the original book I didn't understand this myself, as I hadn't yet studied at this level – and I wouldn't have been ready even if I had. I thought *yoga* was about a quiet mind and meditation – which it is to some degree – but this is just the foundation. The mind needs to be still enough before freedom can be understood. This may be realised through the process of discrimination between what is real (that which doesn't change – the self) and what is always changing (everything else, including the body, mind and emotions). This is what real health is – being fully integrated on all levels of being. Ultimately *yoga* is really about unlinking from our identification to suffering (our life story) by the understanding of who we really are. People with chronic health challenges have an amazing opportunity, through their difficulties, to realise this.

I am now spending a lot of time in Spain writing. I have two book projects that I am working on. One is on *yoga* philosophy for healing and energy and the other is called *The Guru in the Spare Room* which is about my time with a self-realised teacher, the student-teacher relationship, illness and the process of enlightenment. I write only for the joy of creation. I still run regular *yoga* retreats in the UK and abroad suitable for all abilities (FionaAgombar.co.uk) and I hold teacher-training programmes on ME/CFS and burnout for *yoga* teachers and health professionals through Yoga Campus and the British Wheel of Yoga. These courses are expanding all the time because CFS is, sadly, a growing problem.

Other teachers such as Leah Barnett and Katrina Heather are now coming on board, helping to raise standards, and we're beginning to receive interest in the course from outside the UK because *yoga* offers such an amazing toolbox for self-healing for all chronic conditions. I call this "the magic of *yoga*." I now teach in a way that, whilst embracing everything from the KHYF tradition, focuses on putting participants back in touch with their physical being and directs them to become present and quiet and therefore in touch with the authentic self. I teach like this because I understand the problem – I was out of touch with my own being for many years. Most people with CFS are usually very hyper-aroused and have an overactive, busy mind. This means that they are detached from the presence of who they are – and also from the body – so relaxation, letting go, staying present and non-judgemental and connecting with the physical being is a vitally starting point. I'm also interested in understanding how trauma can be released at the physical level, so this is something I also work with. I teach *yoga* as something creative, from my heart, so that whatever arises in each moment for me and the people I'm with is responded to in a way which brings about the maximum opportunity for healing – from the point of stillness. Until we learn to slow down and live mindfully in the flow of life and, rather than going against it by looking to the material for our peace, then I believe CFS, burnout and other

conditions triggered by stress will continue to manifest themselves. Sadly, many people are uncomfortable about being quiet and will do anything to avoid this. Whilst we have continual cues from the environment telling us we're not good enough, that we need to buy more to be better, that we need the status of the right relationship or job and that we should be judged by what we have rather than by who we are, then we will continue to mistakenly and frantically rush around and reach outside ourselves for solutions, when the answer is that it is really an inside job.

So for the time being I continue to write and teach and, best of all, meet lots of wonderful people. Most of all I like being still, marvelling at the wonder of life, however it manifests, and I hope that *yoga* can lead you to this inner joy too.

~ Fiona Agombar, August 2012